

Catari na Frois

## Identification and Anonymity

Two Sides of the Same Coin<sup>?</sup>

Who are you?  
I really want to know...  
(The Who)

The lyrics of the track that play over the credits at the beginning of an episode of the TV serial C.S.I. – Crime Scene Investigation – poses the crucial question around which this essay revolves: “Who are you?”. It is a categorical way of illustrating how this becomes a recurring issue we have to deal with in a variety of everyday life situations that involve dealing with others. There would seem to be a contradiction or opposition between the name we answer to or the different technologies used to identify, recognize and distinguish us, and our attempts to escape those same devices resorting to disguises, false identities, pseudonyms or anonymity. But in fact they turn out to be parallel processes. The need for identification and the escape through anonymity go hand in hand. There are many reasons that can explain the variety of actions that individuals assume socially. For the moment, it is important that we think about the conditions that have made these two phenomena so pressing.

I will strive to put in contrast the following basic ideas: the need for identification against the need for anonymity. As I have said, these phenomenons are not considered here as independent, I think of them as parallel, ways of interaction and communication within society; an important part of an individual’s reality as a social being. Interdependency in this case means, in our view, that new technology for individual identification is accompanied by new forms of attaining anonymity, both processes simultaneously validating each others strategies.

The first part of this essay follows the book *Documenting Individual Identity*, edited by Jane Caplan and John Torpey (2001). It is used here mainly

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<sup>?</sup> I wish to thank Gary T. Marx, David Lyon and Charles Raab for their comments to earlier drafts of this paper.

as a reference that may help us understand the modernization of identification procedures in an ever more complex society.

The second part will take a closer look at anonymity, focusing especially on the way it is experienced in those self-help groups denominated “anonymous”. The data used for analysis was almost entirely researched for my PhD in Anthropology during fieldwork carried out between October 2002 and March 2005 with Families Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous in the Lisbon area, Portugal. This part of the paper will discuss the way anonymity proves to be fundamental in the course of the action, assuming specific and apparently contradictory features. Here, I will also approach the idea of the possibility of anonymity in a face to face context.

I am aware that the scope of these issues cannot be contained in a short paper like this one, and that some aspects may be left unexplored or partially so. I will not go into great detail on the issue regarding the distinction between identification and identity; the idea of surveillance and all that it entails, will be considered mainly as an important reference; the same will be the case with the idea of privacy. I will nevertheless try to include these issues, acknowledging the interest they hold for scholars in this area and related areas, since it crosses multidisciplinary concerns in an advanced theoretical and ethnographic context.

### *Identification as an Issue*

As much as has been written on *identity*<sup>1</sup> in the social sciences, there has been little reflection around *identification*, or the role played by identification in the way an individual defines him/herself. Even considering that the different processes of identification are external to the individual – in the sense that what we are dealing with here specifically is not the subject presenting him/herself, but the variety of mechanisms that allow us to know him/her – we admit that the vast array of documentation, of physical evidence that can be used to identify a singular body, tell us nothing about who we are as subjects with a personal history and life experience. They are, in effect a fundamental part of our movements and everyday experience, of our attire, of the everyday objects we carry around; all of which are essential in the relationships we maintain with others. Poster states: “Social security cards, drivers’ licenses, credit cards, library cards and the like – the individual must apply for them, have them ready at all times, use them continuously” (1990:93).

Whereas in the Middle Ages recognition was made mainly through the use of symbols, insignias or attire, as in the case of travelers for example, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we see the beginning of a concern to create records with information on individuals on a large scale, using the name, marital

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<sup>1</sup> See Giddens (1991), Stuart Hall (1996), Herzfeld (1997).

status, place of birth or address. We witness the birth of bureaucracy and the bureaucratic State in all its extension. From the moment that the concern with identification of individuals starts, it is connected with keeping written records, which need qualified personnel who will not be tied up by personal motivations, but who will simply enforce the law equally for all. This constitutes an essential element in the definition of bureaucracy in its widest sense. Following Max Weber's idea

the growing complexity and specialization in modern cultures demand for its external structure an employee who will be personally uninvolved and strictly objective, to substitute the lord of earlier times, who was moved by personal feelings, favors, sympathies and gratitude (1976: 48)<sup>2</sup>.

On one hand, we have the growth of population in the cities, the resulting increase of mobility and anonymity; and on the other hand, the need for a bureaucratic machine that will treat all subjects on equal terms, making no distinctions of any kind, and can keep records containing information regarding each individual.

The ways to identify a person extend in different directions as we move forward in time and consider different cultural and historical settings. Later on, passports are introduced (internal and external) to somehow control the movements of citizens within and beyond the frontiers of their countries of origin. Other technologies have been developed in this process: fingerprint records, anthropometric measurements, and the attempt to establish physical patterns that may somehow allow 'predicting' deviant tendencies or propensity for relapse; decoding human DNA; surveillance by closed circuit television cameras; the use of the body as a source of visual identification through the deciphering of the elements that make it unique.

The appearance of these techniques permits us to contemplate issues that transcend the function for which they were initially used. Therefore, if at first they were intended primarily for the identification of criminals and to figure out possible genetic patterns that might lead to deviant behavior, they quickly started being used as a means at the disposal of official utilities on the whole, irrespective of ends for which they were meant. Some of the objections raised by this use are related mainly to the fact that this transformation started to be shared indiscriminately. Fingerprint records were initially only taken for criminals or in crime-related situations; in the case of DNA samples, their first use was chiefly medical. In both cases, once their utility was proved as a way to identify and

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<sup>2</sup> About bureaucracy, surveillance and modernity see Dandeker (1990), Herzfeld (1992), Poster (1995, 1990).

differentiate all and every single person, they were quickly adopted, and became considered a part of our bureaucratic routines.

What I consider relevant in this example is the ‘adaptation’ of individual identification techniques and technologies, for purposes other than those initially considered. This is all the more evident when we think about the goals involved: crime prevention, the control of individuals to ensure their safety, commercial-oriented, and consumer profiling purposes, etc. In other words, new/old instruments of identification are met by new/old needs. Nelkin & Lindee, in their study on the cultural appropriations of DNA, also claim:

Despite continued controversy over methods and motives, efforts to determine the genetic basis of human behaviors such as alcoholism and crime draw legitimacy from the rising fortunes of molecular biology. These efforts have captured public attention, for such research addresses critical social questions – about the basis of human identity and individual differences, the nature of deviance, and the local of responsibility for social problems (2004: 10).

In relation to surveillance, I am reminded of the concept of the *Panopticon* mentioned by Michel Foucault. The idea behind this device was the total monitoring of an individual by another within a prison, creating to that end facilities that would make it possible. This concept is widely spread today through the use of closed-circuit surveillance cameras (CCTV) that we find everywhere to a greater or lesser degree, according to the context in question (see Marx, 1995). It may be worth to go over Foucault’s idea so that we can later appreciate, by comparison, the currency of his thought:

The Panopticon is a device intended to dissociate the pair see/be seen [...] to be totally seen without ever seeing [...] an important device since it de-individualizes power [...] so it becomes irrelevant to know who exerts it. Almost anybody, taken at random, can operate such a machine (1996: 167).

As Norris & Armstrong observe, however, despite the differences as to the purpose of the surveillance mechanism described by Foucault, when we compare it with the uses of CCTV (in the case of the Panopticon, Foucault describes its function as the indoctrination and conditioning of the behavior of the individual being punished; whereas with CCTV the uses and purposes are more varied although it doesn't track a person from one location to the other, i.e., different cameras in different places are not connected in a way that allow the total monitoring of an individual), I am led to admit that the principle involved is equal for both. A totalitarian device with regard to the individual which results in his/her movements being followed, recorded and, wherever it may seem adequate, punished. As in the passage quoted previously, Norris and Armstrong

also admit the advantages of a de-individualized surveillance device – that is, not influenced by its operator’s will – but, when they consider the use of machines as instruments, they take this idea to the limit:

Human visual capability has difficulty competing with the high surveillance capabilities of the camera: the camera does not blink, sleep or get bored and, unlike images captured on videotape, the results of human visual surveillance cannot be rewound or replayed in a court of law (op. cit.: 18).

Another issue that deserves attention in this frame of analysis is raised by David Lyon (2001) and has to do with the fact that a person’s body, as a crucial element for the subject’s identification, is increasingly devoid of individuality. If at a basic level, the choice of name for a person becomes a central feature of the way the individual is presented to others, and contains a personal history and experience that is by itself an *individualizing* feature, we have to admit that nowadays knowing (in the sense of legal identification recognition) who this or that person is, doesn’t necessary imply a knowledge of his/her personal, emotional or cultural history, but exclusively of his/her body. As the author puts it:

Once it was merely the existence of unique bodies that was part of the rationale for individuation, and for stabilizing difference. But now, for example, through fingerprint, other signs of bodily distinctiveness are appealed to. Direct checking from the 1970s on became a matter of verification by a third-party organization. This was done digitally by methods such as data matching since dataveillance regimes were electronically established in the 1980s. But from the 1990s, it became clear that direct checking would take in yet another meaning: access to tissues, fluids, images, and patterns available from the body itself. Just as direct checking across agencies avoided confrontation with the embodied agent, so direct checking of data produced from within bodies also requires no access to the speech or the memory of the person. It is, once again, abstracted from the person (2001: 296-297).

Here, we are in a position to rethink the old debate within social studies between the idea of individual and person<sup>3</sup>, in light of the new elements for analysis raised by the issues described. If we consider Lyon’s proposition, it seems legitimate to add a new element of analysis to this equation: the body of the individual or person, regardless of the other features described above. In other words, the anonymous body, identical to all other bodies yet at the same time unique and distinguishable. The body as an amorphous entity, that can be objectified independently of who is inhabiting it. We are no longer considering the person or the individual’s will to be different, but the fact that it may be so, regardless of the subject’s will; that is, the body as a separate element.

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<sup>3</sup> See Carrithers, Collins & Lukes (1985), Fortes (1987).

In this first part, my goal was to cross the problem of identification with other directly related issues: bureaucracy, modernity, urbanity, the body, individual and person, privacy or surveillance. I found that processes of identification have become increasingly complex with time, keeping up with various social transformations. This issue is not merely a question of the ‘legal’ or ‘official’ identification, but also of the need individuals have to identify themselves and others by means of social and moral control. In my view, it is the awareness of this need that triggers the discussion of control-freedom, which is translated in this essay into identification-anonymity. As there are different motives that contribute to our need to know the identity of those interacting with us, this can mean that it assumes different features. Therefore, while we find that there is a wide range of ways to identify us, at the same time we realize that the simultaneous need to act ‘incognito’, to remain anonymous, and as such, unidentified, is also related with the factors described previously.

I now propose a brief analysis of the notion of anonymity in the social sciences so that we can next discuss this concept in view of the empirical information collected during fieldwork with associations that make anonymity a rule.

### *Anonymity in Social Sciences – A Brief Account*

Une foule d’inconnus s’y croisent constamment. Il est une manière d’être citadin, inculquée dès l’enfance, qui consiste à marcher dans la rue sans sauter comme un cabri ni montrer les passants du doigt, sans se faire remarquer, individu semblable aux autres, neutres et anonymes. L’anonymat est au coeur du phénomène urbain. Il règne en maître dans les lieux publics, protecteur de chacun, du soi non révélé, condition aussi nécessaire que la précédente à la coexistence de millions d’habitants (Pétonnet, 1987: 249).

Anonymity’s importance as an issue for reflection can be quite simply traced in broad terms. It has become increasingly relevant in the field of social studies. Furthermore, and despite the growing concern of this issue for sociologists, anthropologists, historians and other scholars, I realize that this issue suffers constant change and that there is still room for exploration. I propose a broad (and necessarily short) approach to the way in which this phenomenon has been dealt with recently. To mention but a few examples, we discover anonymity being analyzed in relation to issues connected to the use of Internet and information society, literature, phenomenology, privacy, anthropology.

Helen Nissenbaum (1999, 1998) takes the idea of anonymity in its wider sense, as it is defined in the dictionary (the absence of a name for the subject of an action) to argue that in a society dominated by information technologies and by the recognition of the other, anonymity is not simply the absence of a name,

but the possibility of remaining “unreachable”. The sociologist Gary Marx (1999) is thinking along these lines when he lays down a conceptual framework, combining anonymity and identification, in an attempt to chart the kinds of situations in which the appeal to anonymity is justified, as well as the need to identify subjects. Jo Ann Oravec (2003) discusses the way anonymity and privacy assume ever more diverging forms, by the combination of multiple contexts in which these phenomena can occur, or be at risk; arguing that they constitute identity management devices for individuals.

Robert Griffin (2003) reflects on the use of anonymity and/or pseudonyms in literary works (from the 16th to the 20th century), arguing that anonymity is like a mask that authors choose to put on at the moment of publication – regardless of their motivations for choosing to do so – and which is in itself an identifying mark of the author. Maurice Natanson (1979), following Alfred Schutz’s thoughts regarding the “anonymous”, considers nomination, or the act of nominating, as being at the core of anonymity, and of the relationships established among individuals in everyday face to face situations. Daniel Terrole (1996), in his work on the homeless (“Sans-Domicile-Fixe”) considers anonymity to be part of a liminal process, in which the subject gradually loses his/her personal distinctive features. Milandou (1997), based on the case study of the relationships between natives of Brazzaville, reflects on the confrontation between the anonymity which is typical of big cities, and the strategies employed by their inhabitants to be conspicuous, at least around their own neighborhood, in an attempt to preserve ways of interaction that are typical of smaller communities.

What all these views have in common is the fact that they consider anonymity to be related with the absence of some kind of identity element of the acting subject. As we have seen at the beginning of this essay, these elements are a crucial part of our daily routines and of the way we interact with others. We might take this to be a definition of anonymity in its wider sense, which in our view is consensual as to: 1) the way anonymity is defined in the dictionary (absence of the name of the subject in an action); 2) the different contexts and case studies presented here. However, I will now introduce some elements that will help us to divide this concept further, considering anonymity to be not only a form of personal information management, but in fact a condition that must be obeyed in some contexts for interaction to exist. The elements which I will present next, allow us to formulate these proposals based on the fact that I consider anonymity to be a way of managing the personal information we give others and a necessity that must be complied with so that the action may successfully unfold in the physical presence of others.

*Anonymity in Anonymous Groups*

The data presented herein are the result of a *work in progress* since 2002, initially with Families Anonymous, and later with Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Fieldwork was carried out with groups chosen in the Lisbon area (Portugal), in participant observation of weekly meetings, at different locations and schedules. In addition, interviews were held with group members, trying, whenever possible, to register different stages of membership.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) focus on problems related to alcohol abuse. In my experience, the groups in this association are made up mainly of female members in an age group ranging between 35 and 60 years of age. Narcotics Anonymous (NA) deal with issues concerning “addiction”.<sup>4</sup> In other words, they are concerned with drug and alcohol abuse, or abuse of other chemical substances. Contrary to the previous group, I observed a predominance of male members between 25 and 45 years of age. Families Anonymous (FA) is meant for people who have a relative with an addiction problem, mainly women between 45 and 65. All these associations are exclusively run by members, without the intervention of professional specialists in the different areas, thus their definition as self-help, or mutual-help groups.

As a result of sharing a common model, all three associations describe themselves as Fellowships, Non-profit Organizations, with a particular statute and organization, in which certain individuals meet to “solve” the problems that brought them there through a process of mutual identification and the sharing of common feelings and situations. According to their philosophy, the *12 Steps* are “stages” or “principles” that the subject must go through, in order to gradually reach a stable situation, both physically as well as emotionally, regarding the problem they are dealing with. Along with the *12 Traditions* (rules that dictate the way the group behaves), they are the basis for these associations.

Meetings take place in diverse locations, although we registered a preference for religious buildings (churches and parishes), and an attempt to avoid “exposed” places, so as to ensure the privacy of anyone who seeks them. In other words, the choice of site depends on availability of rooms (and the agreement of a landlord) rather than on other kinds of issues. This fact becomes even more interesting if we compare it, for instance, with the existence of surveillance cameras in the cities, as I mentioned earlier. Even though in Portugal this technology is not widely spread (it can only be found in major cities), when it comes to choosing a space to hold meetings in, there is a

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<sup>4</sup> The term addiction is used here in the sense commonly given by the informants, without further discussion of the concept. On this subject, see Davies (1997). There are other works focusing on therapeutic groups that follow the 12 Step model, such as Keane (2000), Ronel (2000), Cain (1997), Antze (1987).

preference for discrete sites, which can not be immediately connected with their activity and are protected from public scrutiny. In the context of these anonymous groups, members value above all else the absence of a moral judgment on the part of outsiders concerning their addiction as drug addicts (NA), alcoholics (AA) or relatives of people with these problems (FA).

The members of anonymous groups want to be able to participate and do not want their acceptance to depend on the elements that are socially significant outside the group. We might say, therefore, that from the moment they step into a meeting, or when they speak as a member, wherever this may be, that they strip off all other attributes and become simply individuals with a specific problem that is common to everyone and constitutes their only bond. Elements of identity— such as their place of residence, profession, education or marital status – are destitute of their importance in this context.

All of this can only be properly assessed if we understand, on one hand, the emotional charge that lies behind the motives that drive a person who seeks this kind of association, and on the other hand, the issue of anonymity. In fact, the existence and protection of anonymity are considered crucial for all the action to unfold in this manner. It is one of the basic principles in the philosophy of all these associations. Anonymity is discussed here, not simply in its most common sense, which has to do with the absence of a name or any other form of individual identification, but equally important, as a form of protection searched by individuals in this context.

As we have shown in the first part of this paper and considering that in contemporary society it is increasingly more difficult to pass unrecognized, we realize that this fact does not, however, reduce the need individuals have of going incognito in certain circumstances in the course of their lives. If, as we have found, identification is only partial – since it only reveals the legal definition of a person and omits elements of one's social, cultural and emotional individuality – in the case of anonymous groups, it is precisely this 'flip side of the coin', so to speak, that is revealed. It is precisely the particular configuration of the context in which the action occurs, that allows only certain elements of an individual's identity to be revealed, namely as a subject with a certain condition, given that anonymity is also only partial and limited.

In these associations anonymity is respected outside the group as well as within it, despite face to face contact occurring in a meeting. Initially, 'not having to say who you are' proves to be paramount, even if, as Erving Goffman (1983) claims, all face to face interaction, including non verbal interaction, implies knowledge of the other. In this particular case, the fact that members come together to discuss a specific problem (common to all) without having to reveal everyday situations that could expose them – such as who they are, where they live – is determinant, and renders all other descriptions irrelevant.

Anonymity is considered a guarantee and a condition of inclusion of the members in these associations, at the same time this is considered a therapeutic vehicle in itself. It applies both inside and outside the group. This means that anonymity is respected within these groups as to who and what is revealed there.

Outside the meetings, anonymity is used to guarantee the confidentiality of what is said by whom, and even the membership of subject *a* or *b*. This results not just from the stigma that people feel, but also from the fact that they find anonymity to be a leveling element, abolishing any differences that they have between them beyond the specific motivations that drew them there.

*When you are there, it doesn't matter if you are a lawyer, or a doctor; if you are wealthy, come from royalty or off the street. It doesn't matter, that is not important, the name is not important, all those things don't matter. The only thing on your mind is your intention of starting something new in which drugs have no part (Diogo, 38 years old, has been in Narcotics Anonymous for 5 years).*

Regardless of the way relationships develop among individuals in this context – we find that initially they are marked by some embarrassment and discomfort, but later assume different features – we must not rule out anonymity in a face to face interaction. In other words, even if at a certain stage, members start developing bonds of friendship and trust that go beyond the limits or goals of group meetings, the important thing is the choice provided by this rule. The freedom to choose what to say, to whom and when, is in itself a way of making therapy possible, as well as the groups and meetings themselves.

### *Conclusion*

In the course of this essay I tried to discuss two issues that, while different, are interdependent: the need to be identified on one hand, and the need to remain anonymous on the other. I believe that both these needs cannot be truly understood separately, since we can only understand the real proportions of either when we consider their origin, and only realize their relevance if we measure one and the other.

My goal was to account for different perspectives surrounding the issue of identification and anonymity. In the first part of this paper, I tried to show that underlying this notion there are many others that can be looked at separately, as for instance urban growth in the modern age; the creation of egalitarian and uniform forms of identification that keep up with people's increasing mobility; crime-fighting policies; the creation of surveillance systems; the need to profile consumers, markets and trends, etc. In short, we have a whole range of mechanisms that allow us to know more about people's actions, whereabouts and habits, in a world where technology and science play an ever growing role in the way we relate to each other.

Identification and anonymity can therefore co-exist, and the point is to distinguish between the different types of identification – legal, emotional, physical – and the type of anonymity we are dealing with, considering that anonymity is partial, relative and limited in space and time. In the case of anonymous groups, I tried to describe the role played by anonymity, not just as a rule, but as a necessary element which becomes the *leitmotiv* that makes relationships possible, effective and specific. Anonymity becomes a choice that people can use for themselves, for the identity they want to communicate, whether they are physically present or otherwise. Individuals in this situation are concerned, above all else, with their motives, and it is based on them that they manage their identity, and that ultimately answers the question we opened this paper with: “Who are you?” Anonymity is a mask the member puts on, both within and without the group, in their contact with an “outside world” that they feel to be judging. In these groups, anonymity is more than the possibility of managing personal information; it becomes a common referent of interaction. It is a choice and an option that determines the whole action. I have tried to show that there is more to anonymity than the difficulty in attaining it in an environment of sophisticated detection and identification technology. Based on the data collected during fieldwork, I arrive at two kinds of conclusions: individuals find ways to ‘escape’ surveillance (in this case study it is chiefly moral); and, in the physical presence of another, an individual adapts himself and his personal information and directs it to a specific goal depending on the situation. Anonymity is therefore an alternative to physical, moral and social control and is constantly adapting to circumstances.

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